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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: INFORMATION AND CULTURE MINISTER SAYS
KAZAKHSTAN WILL FULFILL MADRID COMMITMENTS

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: During a November 5 meeting, the Ambassador stressed to Information and Culture Minister Mukhtar Kul-Mukhammed the importance of Kazakhstan's follow through on its Madrid commitments on democratic reform. Kul-Mukhammed responded that all the necessary legislation will soon be introduced to parliament and will be adopted by year's end or, at the latest, by the beginning of 12009. The legislation will represent a step forward on democratization, but will not satisfy everyone, as laws have to be consistent with political and cultural realities, he argued. Kul-Mukhammed described the U.S. elections as a "shining example of U.S. democracy." He welcomed the opportunity for more cooperation with the Embassy on cultural programs. He also said that Astana's new concert hall, which will have seating for 3,500, will be completed in 2010. END SUMMARY.

MADRID COMMITMENTS

13. (SBU) During a November 5 meeting, the Ambassador stressed to Information and Culture Minister Mukhtar Kul-Mukhammed the importance of Kazakhstan's follow through on its Madrid commitments on democratic reform. He suggested that timely adoption of the necessary legislation would further enhance President Nazarbayev's image as an international statesman.

14. (SBU) In response, Kul-Mukhammed thanked the Ambassador for the U.S. government's support for Kazakhstan's selection as 2010 OSCE chairman, explaining that Kazakhstan's candidacy would not have succeeded without it. He acknowledged that the chairmanship was both an honor and a responsibility. Kazakhstan would not be successful as chairman in pressing other countries to take steps on democracy if it was not taking such steps itself, he argued. Regarding the Madrid commitments, Kul-Mukhammed said that the three pieces of draft legislation -- which would amend Kazakhstan's election, political party, and media laws -- have been reviewed within the government, and only small details remain to be finalized. His ministry is responsible, together with the Ministry of Justice, for the media and political party legislation. He expected that within two weeks, all the legislation will be ready for introduction to parliament. He did not anticipate that parliament will make any significant changes and said that

parliamentary approval of everything should occur by the end of the year or, at the latest, by the very beginning of 2009.

15. (SBU) Kul-Mukhammed maintained that the legislative changes will represent a real step forward on democratization, but naturally will not satisfy everyone. Laws have to be consistent with political and cultural realities, and suit a country and its citizens, he argued. Kazakhstan is well ahead of the other Central Asian countries in terms of democratic development, but is indisputably far behind the United States and Europe. The mass media is a particularly sensitive issue, Kul-Mukhammed explained. Terming the United States "a land of believers," he chose to point to the opening passage of the Gospel of John (i.e., "in the beginning there was the Word... and the Word was God") to stress that the media has a very strong influence on society, shaping public opinion and creating social harmony. The political situation in Kazakhstan is a delicate one, and some things in the media can lead to conflict. Kul-Mukhammed explained that he had recently had a roundtable with a group of journalists, including opposition journalists, and had told them that in an ideal world, there would be no need for Kazakhstan to have a Ministry of Information, but realities necessitate one.

RUSSIAN MEDIA

16. (SBU) Kul-Mukhammed noted that in a meeting several months previously, he and former U.S. Ambassador to Kazakhstan John Ordway had discussed the issue of Russian media domination in Kazakhstan. He explained to the Ambassador that if Kazakhstan tried to close off access to the Russian media, it would come under heavy criticism. That said, only one Russian television station -- ORT -- is permitted to broadcast without restrictions, while the others are subject to Kazakhstani content rules. (NOTE: In fact, it does not

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appear to us that any Russian television stations broadcasting to Kazakhstan have significant Kazakhstani content. END NOTE.) The Ambassador explained that a Russian-language version of BBC or CNN would provide Kazakhstani viewers with additional sources of information beyond Russian ones and thus improve the media environment. Kul-Mukhammed responded that we should work together on this issue. He also asked for assistance in building up Kazakhstan's CaspioNET satellite television to better broadcast information about Kazakhstan to other countries.

U.S. ELECTIONS

17. (SBU) Kul-Mukhammed congratulated the Ambassador on the U.S. elections. He described them as an "unforgettable political show," and a "shining example of U.S. democracy and American patriotism" that showed that in the United States, anything is possible. (NOTE: Kul-Mukhammed has children studying in the United States and hopes to send his other children to study there, too, once they are old enough. END NOTE.)

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

18. (SBU) The Ambassador praised the "cultural diplomacy" of Kazakhstani Ambassador to the United States Yerlan Idrissov, especially his efforts to promote Kazakhstani cooperation with the Smithsonian Institution. He noted that American composer Anne LeBaron is composing a cantata about Kazakhstan that will be performed in Almaty in 2009 and is looking for Kazakhstani support for this project. Kul-Mukhammed responded that Kazakhstan very much wants to promote its culture. The country is very proud of its talented artists, many of whom perform abroad. He assigned Vice Minister Askar Buribayev, who was also present in the meeting, to follow up on any cultural initiatives from the U.S. Embassy.

ASTANA'S NEW CONCERT HALL

19. (SBU) The Ambassador asked about the ongoing construction of Astana's new concert hall, which was visible from the window of the meeting room. Kul-Mukhammed explained the building will be finished in 2010 and would seat 3,500 people. Its unusual design will maximize acoustics, making it possible to do some performances without the use of microphones. He said that the design concept is

not really a new one -- rather, it is similar to that of the Berlin Philharmonic, which was completed in the 1960s, Rome's Parco della Musica, and Tokyo's Suntory Hall. A group of Kazakhstani artists visited Suntory Hall in 2004 and were impressed with the design. The Ambassador said that, while he could make no promises, he would like to explore the possibility of having a major U.S. orchestra perform in the new concert hall once it is completed.

HOAGLAND